Tim C. ***The River* Essential Question Essay** Humanities 6C

11-28-11 Mr. Baskin

The essential question asked by Gary Paulsen in *The River* is “How should one behave in the face of overwhelming difficulty?” After reading *The River,* I also think that that is the essential question of the book. Gary Paulsen answers that question in *The River,* by showing that Brian was persistent, brave, and experienced. If he were not brave, persistent, or experienced he and Derek may not have survived the river and the woods. This will be proved by answers and examples from the story.

Brian Robeson [the main character of *The River*] is experienced, brave, and persistent. The most important and essential character trait of Brian is his persistence. Persistence means to be determined, confident, to have a positive mental attitude, and to never give up. Brian shows his persistence on page 107 when he refused to throw Derek off the raft, despite the nagging idea that Derek was the cause of all of this trouble.

Brian Robeson is also a very brave person. Bravery is to be able to overcome difficult and overwhelming. His bravery was shown clearly on page 13, when Brian makes the final decision to go out into the woods again. Most people [if they had done what Brian had done a year earlier] would never go out and survive in the woods with only a knife and a radio.

Lastly, Brian Robeson is experienced. To be experienced means to know things from experience, and to be used to things you have experienced before. Brian clearly shows that he is experienced on page 45, when he finds a specific fire stone and uses it to make fire with his knife. That clearly shows his experience because he knows how to find a fire stone, what fire stones look like, and how to use a fire stone.

The conflict in *The River* changes from the beginning of the story, to the end of the story. The conflict of the book in the beginning of the book is that Brian and Derek have to survive with only a knife and a radio, without any extra supplies. Brian decided not to bring any extra emergency supplies, because he thought it would ruin the experience. It turns out Brian’s decision was not the best decision. The conflict changes when Derek is struck by lightning and the radio breaks. The main problem is still to survive, but now Brian must get Derek to safety and still survive. If Brian had chosen to keep the supplies the conflict might not have been this severe now.

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The problem-solving process that Brian uses to solve his new conflict is the thinking process. There are nine steps in the thinking or problem-solving process.

The first step in the thinking process involves making an observation or a having a perception. This means that a person senses an event. At this moment, the person who sensed the event does not know what it is. Thus, he or she naturally reflects or wonders what it is that he or she just heard or saw or felt or tasted or smelled, etc. Reflecting/ Wondering is the second moment in the problem-solving process. Often, this leads the person to investigate further the event that was sensed or observed. If enough information is available, the person will name the event or identify the problem that he or she had just sensed. That is the third moment in the thinking process.

Next comes the fourth step in this problem-solving process: Considering Alternatives or Options.

That is the fourth moment in the thinking process/problem-solving process. Once the person has listed the possible alternatives, then a decision must be made as to which alternative or choice is most logical. The next step, the fifth step, in the process of making this decision is often what we mean when we use the word “thinking.” But really what most often happens here is that the person engages in a mental “what-if game.” Basically, this means that the person tries to make a prediction of what in the future what would most likely happen if each choice, or solution, were selected. Based upon those predictions, the problem-solver chooses a solution. That is the sixth moment in the thinking process.

The next, and seventh step, involves making a plan of how to put the solution into action. After this, the problem-solver gathers resources or information to use when the plan is done. That is the eighth step. Finally, in the ninth step, the problem-solver actually conducts or does the solution.

On page 66 of The River, we clearly see an example of the third step in the thinking process: identifying or naming the problem. Here, on page 66, we learn that Brian has a name for Derek’s problem. He says that Derek is in a coma. Shortly, thereafter, on page 67, Brian starts to feel angry at himself for allowing himself to be talked into going back into the woods to teach survival skills to Derek. Brian starts to feel sorry for himself. But then he stops himself, because he hears himself acting babyish and immature. On page 67 he says, “Listen to me… If I were talking out loud, I’d be whining. Derek gets hit and I act like I’m the one getting messed up.” Derek stops himself from feeling sorry for himself. And then he moves on to trying to solve the problem of saving Derek’s life.

Brian clearly is considering his options on page 67 when he thinks, “Could he stay here with Derek for a week or ten days and wait for them? Could he not stay? What choices did he have?” Brian is listing all of the different choices that he has.

At the end of this chapter, after Brian senses the smell of human waste; he identifies that Derek has “soiled” himself. Brian chooses a solution when he says, “It had to be done. He had to clean Derek, take care of him, take care of another human being.”

So, Brian comes up with a solution to clean up Derek’s waste. We read on page 68 that the resources that Brian gathers are a stick and grass. Then he performs, or does, the solution when he carries Derek’s waste and buries it in a hole.

The thinking process/problem-solving process continues. In chapter 13, on page 71, Brian is clearly reflecting or wondering when we read that “He spent the morning trying to remember what he knew” about comas. At the top of page 72, Brian makes a prediction about how long he thinks Derek can survive. We read, “But Brian was sure Derek could not go that long without water…. Somewhere he’d heard or read or seen that the human body couldn’t go that long without water.” So, Brian makes a “small spoonlike holder out of birch bark” and pours water down Derek’s throat. Here, Brian has used resources and has acted on his instincts. When he sees that Derek coughs up the water, Brian has another problem: Derek cannot drink.

At this point, on page 73, Brian doesn’t know what to do. He throws down a stick, which bounces into Derek’s briefcase. When Brian sees the briefcase, “as if for the first time” he is making an observation. When Brian says, “What have you got in here?” he is Wondering/Reflecting. When Brian opens up Derek’s briefcase, he finds the map of the wilderness area where they are. On the map, he sees a river.

Brian unfolds the map and he follows the flow of the river. He observes the words “Brannock Trading Post,” on page 78.

When we read that Brian thinks to himself, “There would be people there…. A trading post would have people” we know that he is making a prediction. On page 79, we read that Brian calculates that the trading post is about 150 kilometers, or just under 100 miles. When Brian thinks to himself that he could leave Derek and go down the river and bring back help, he is considering the options. But then, he predicts that wild animals might attack or eat Brian. Brian decides that he cannot leave Derek. Here, he is making a decision.

At the very bottom of page 79, we read, “What if he took Derek with him?” Here, Brian is using “what-if” thinking. Once again, this is the step of making a prediction. On page 80, Brian makes numerous predictions: “If he stayed, Derek would die of thirst…. If he made the run…at least there was a chance.” Finally, Brian chooses a solution at the end of page 80 when we read: “He had no choice.”

At the beginning of chapter 15, Brian calculates that to float down the river would take thirty-five or forty hours. On page 82, he chooses a plan when we read, “He needed to build a raft.”

Shortly after that, on page 82, Brian names or identifies a problem. The problem is not that he lacks wood, but that he lacks a hatchet or axe to cut wood to build a raft. Luckily, Brian observes on page 83 that beavers have felled trees, and the trees are the right size to make a raft. He thinks, “It’s like I hired them.” Here, Brian is making a decision to use the trees cut down by the beavers. In fact, we read in the next-to-last paragraph on page 84, “He had a plan…for what he was going to do.” On page 85, Brian actually performs, or does his plan. He weaves together the large and small pieces of wood cut down by the beavers, and he cuts strips of cloth from his jacket to hold the logs firmly in place.

At the end of chapter 15, on page 87, Brian must decide if he, in fact, will act on his plan of bringing Derek down the river on the raft. So, Brian goes through a process that looks a little like a scientific experiment. He thinks, “… if there was the slightest, tiniest change in Derek…Brian would call off the trip and hope for the best.” When he looks into Derek’s eyes, measures his breathing and his heartbeat, talks into his ear, and pokes Derek with his knife, Brian is acting out his experiment. But he is really making observations with his senses. When Derek does not react at all, Brian says, “We go.” Here, he is clearly making a decision.

In chapter 16, the thinking process/problem-solving process continues. On pages 92 and 93, Brian slowly drags Derek down to the raft, which is in the river. He places Derek onto the raft. But just before he pushes off into the river, Brian has a sudden thought, “What if they came unexpectedly?” Here, Brian is both wondering/reflecting, considering options and making a prediction, because he is realizing that the plane might come to check on them suddenly. So, Brian goes right to the step of choosing a choice. He decides that he has to write a note to rescuers just in case they show up. Brian writes the note. He is acting or performing.

And then, on pages 94 and 95, Brian performs one last “scientific” step. He tests the raft to see if it is seaworthy, whether it will support both himself and Derek. Brian conducts or does his experiment by climbing on the raft and by moving back and forth. He concludes that the raft will not tip over. Thus, Brian makes a final decision to act on his solution and push off into the river.

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In chapter 17, Brian and Derek were now heading towards the river from the lake. In the second paragraph of page 97, Brian considers for the last time that he could go back, drag Derek into the shelter, and wait for help. Considering alternatives/options is what he is doing now. Should he go back? Or should Brian keep his course? Brian chooses/makes the choice to keep his course to get on the river from the lake. Brian is starting to perform/do the solution when he gets the raft onto the river.

In chapter 19, Brian and Derek are now traveling down the river to the trading post. Brian is identifying/naming a problem in the second paragraph of page 109. He says that the map may be inaccurate and they’re might not be a trading post any more. This is a serious problem, but Brian decides/chooses to keep his course on the river and trust the “old” map. Brian identifies/names another problem. Derek may be dehydrated. He performs/does the solution to solve the problem by soaking his tee-shirt and putting over it Derek’s face. He does this daily to keep Derek hydrated.

In chapter 20, Brian and Derek are still rafting down the river, getting closer to the trading post every day. Brian is on the raft when he looks at the map and sees something strange. He sees contour lines on the map that were hills in front of him. He heard something dead ahead, in between two boulders. He heard hissing and rushing water. He observes that there is something wrong with the water ahead, by hearing the hissing water. Brian identifies/names the problem when he states that they are nearing a drop in the water!

In chapter 21, Brian and Derek are heading towards the small drop. The raft splashes and turns its way through the boulders. Brian is knocked off the raft! After the fall Brian swims out of the water and sees the raft speeding away without him. Brian observes this new problem by seeing it. Naming/identifying problem is what Brian is doing now, when he realizes that the raft is gone. Brian may not be able to catch up to the raft!

In chapter 22, Brian lands washed up in shallow water along the bank of the River. He reflects/wonders want had happened previously because he cannot remember. He remembers that the raft floated away from him and that he fell off. He chooses/decides to try to catch up to the raft by swimming in the river. He is starting to perform/ do the solution to catch up to Derek and the raft, by swimming on the river after them.

In chapter 23, Brian was still swimming after the raft and Derek. He was getting worried that he had not yet found Derek and the raft. Brianidentified/named a major problem. He may not be able to catch up to the raft! Brian did get to the raft though, and Derek was still alive! Brian gathered/collected his main resource, the raft. He continued to perform/do the overall solution, to get Derek to safety and escape the woods!

In chapter 24, Brian was getting closer and closer to the trading post. He and Derek were paddling down the river hoping to reach the trading post soon. They had lost the map [not that it mattered much]. Brian saw in the morning, a house along the river. He heard a dog and saw a dock. He had performed/done the main and final solution by paddling over to the dock and getting the man to help get Derek off the raft. It was over and Derek and Brian were safe.

Gary Paulsen’s essential question from *The River* was “How should one behave in the face of overwhelming difficulty.” This essay answers that question by saying that one should be persistent, brave, and experienced. That answer was backed up by text support and details from the story. This is an important message, because to survive any major obstacle, one must be persistent, brave, and experienced to succeed. This lesson greatly connects to my life, because I am a Boy Scout of America, and need to keep a positive mental attitude on campouts. Even if I get lost [hopefully I never do], it is a good idea for me to be persistent, brave, and experienced!